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State-nation-violence. A triangle of political discourse in Spain

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Introduction

On the 22 of March 2006 ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna – Basque Land and Freedom), qualified as a terrorist organization by the European Union and the United States, after 38 years of armed struggle against the Spanish state, declared the permanent cease-fire that was interpreted as a first step towards the end of political violence in the country. The declaration of ceasefire itself came after years very scant activities of the organization that did not claim any mortal victims over the last two and a half years. Yet, while the presence of the organization in the international press has been really negligible, its presence in the Spanish politics has been constant. ETA seems to have a continuous presence in the political discourse no matter how scant are its actual political achievements or possibilities to act.

One of the explanations of such a continuous presence, obviously, lies in the reactions of the states to the problem of political violence and terrorism in general. Terrorism, hitting at the heart of what Buzan et al. called the “political security” of the state (1998, p.144) often incites heated reactions, when, as one of the terrorism experts Loren Lomasky writes: “[s]ober-minded persons of seasoned political judgment adopt near-apocalyptic tones” (Lomasky 1991, p.96) discussing the issue and where the presence of terrorism itself supposedly shows the vulnerabilities of the state and its contingent character, or as William Connolly writes:

Terrorism, as the other constituted by the state system, allows the state and the interstate system to protect the logic of sovereignty in the international sphere while veiling their inability to modify systemic conditions that generate violence by non-state agents (Connolly 1991, p.207).

This explanation, however, can only be partial. It cannot really account for the fact that some states react to this challenge in one way, others in a very different manner, in some it produces serious tensions between the democratic political actors, and in others there is a clear agreement as to how to treat the issue. Obviously, all of the states faced with the issue of terrorism¹ have to deal with some common issues, such as: to negotiate or not the settlement of the conflict? How to treat the terrorists – are they mere criminals or should they be given a different status? What does the state do with the prisoners when the conflict is over? How does the state find a balance between the need to settle conflict and the demands of the victims for justice (often equated with punishment)?

All these questions relate to each other and can be subsumed under a single issue: is terrorism a political crime? The idea of “political crime” as a more elevated version of criminal activity has been prevalent in the European culture since the advent of the great revolutions at the end of 18th century. In France this idea has been especially strong during the second half of the 20th century. Many

¹ I should make a disclaimer here – when I am talking about states faced with terrorism, I am having in mind democratic states, the non-democratic ones and the political violence in them do not interest me in this paper.

of those (in particular Leftist “revolutionaries”) who came into conflict with the authorities of their respective countries because of some violent political acts received asylum in France. In Northern Ireland in the beginning of the “Troubles” the acknowledgement of the political dimension of violence brought the differences in treatment of prisoners in the Irish prisons, admitting that theirs were “political crimes.” (see Von Tangen Page 1998) However, such admittance is rare. As there are strong human rights organizations struggling for the improvement of the conditions for the political prisoners and even their release, the states tend not to admit that the prisoners they are keeping in their penitentiary institutions are “political” prisoners. Having “political prisoners” would mean that the state’s democratic credentials are rather weak, as it is the dictatorships that keep those who hold different political views locked up. In this situation, of course, it is not possible to admit the political dimension of the terrorist crimes and only the side of violence is accentuated.

Here, it is thus necessary to emphasize that this type of discourse stems directly from the general discourse on what democracy is and how it should be conceived on the political level. I am not talking here about the more philosophical questions of how to conceive a democracy, but exactly about those “common sense” discursive understandings that we encounter. Democracy and violence are seen as antithetical. In fact, the discourse of democracy, as Laclau and Mouffe would have it, is based on creating the chains of difference instead of equivalence.² But even in the situations where the logic of difference is at work, there are certain discursive points that remain outside of the whole system. In the democratic framework, the essential one of these outside points is violence. Thus, it comes as no surprise that “political violence” falls completely out of the democratic discourse and the understanding of what democratic politics is about. There is no political violence, because in the democracies “violence” and “political” are antithetical categories. Terrorism thus becomes the Other, the constitutive outside, acting as an element that helps constitute the “self” of the state and even the whole state system and that, at the same time, denies it. The attempts to push violence back to where it belongs – to the outside of politics, thus, come as little surprise. However, what can be seen from the political discourse in the countries facing long-term terrorist challenges is that sometimes violence does come to make part of the democratic discourse. And it is those moments where violence is given recognition as being political in nature.

In Spain, as it was already mentioned, political violence perpetrated by ETA has been a constant in the last 38 years. In addition, its presence in the political discourse has not decreased with the diminish of its “operational capabilities” but in fact amplified to an unprecedented level so that the main political parties agreeing on the economical issues, only disagreed on the issues of terrorism. (see, for example, Martínez in El País, 19 marzo 2006) Such a situation, I would argue

² “[a] project employing the logic of equivalence seeks to divide social space by condensing meanings around two antagonistic poles, [while] a project employing a logic of difference attempts to weaken and displace a sharp antagonistic polarity, endeavoring to relegate that division to the margins of society” (Howarth, Stavrakakis 2000, p.11).

cannot be understood if we did not take into account that the question of violence in the country is closely related to the debates on the nature of the Spanish nation as such and the arrangements of the Spanish state. And this particular relation has a twofold effect: on the one hand, it accentuates the existing issues and on the other, distorts the existing relation between the main political forces by bringing in violence and a stance towards it as one of the dividing front lines. Thus, in this paper I will investigate the place of violence in the discourse of the three parties: the PP (*Partido Popular* – Popular Party), the PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* – Spanish Worker Socialist Party) and EAJ/PNV (*Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea* in Basque/*Partido Nacionalista Vasco* in Spanish – Basque Nationalist Party, further on it will be referred to only by its Spanish abbreviation as PNV). The first two are the most influential on the state level and the last one – PNV is the most influential Basque party.

State-nation-violence

There seem to be few “material” factors that fuel the ETA terrorism and the heated reaction that it receives from the main political actors. After the transition to democracy, the possibilities of self-expression seem to be in place. The economic situation of the region, as of the whole of Spain, is far from difficult and is actually much better than that of the French Basque Country, in which terrorism is basically nonexistent³. On the other hand, ETA activity over the last few years has been negligible. Although it has become more active recently in its extortion activities, these activities look from the outside rather insignificant, more designed to bark than to bite. In spite of this, ETA still remains in the center of political discourse. The reason for that cannot be really understood without taking into consideration how its violence becomes related to other, broader problems, primarily the unsolved issue of what the Spanish nation is, and how that nation should be expressed.

While, as it was mentioned, there is a constant attempt to relegate violence to the outside of the political, we see in many cases how it sneaks in, or the violent actors, even the democratic players themselves, import it into the political arena. While the “criminal” idea of terrorist violence claims that terrorism is essentially the same as organized crime and is not really related to any other issues, in reality the opposite is true. The terrorism such as ETA’s can only remain in the political discourse if it is in fact closely connected to some other problems which have their expression in the field of political discourse. The violence sneaks in not by itself, but as an expression of some disagreements between the political actors. As ETA belongs rather clearly to the category of separatist organizations,⁴ it is thus only plausible to suggest that the issue with which its violence will be related

³ Notwithstanding the fact that the organization tends to put demands on both the French and the Spanish authorities, it has never really used the French Basque Country as a theater for its activities.

⁴ While the organization’s ideology is both nationalist and Marxist, it is the first part that influences the most its actions.

is that of the territorial arrangement of the country in particular and of the understanding of the nation more generally.

The Spanish nation of the PP

The best example of this relation between the understanding of the nation and the understanding of the place of (ETA) violence in the Spanish politics can be found in the discourse of the right-wing Popular Party, which is most keen to appropriate the idea of the Spanish nation and present itself as the guardian of the true understanding of it.

What is that understanding? It is an understanding that is strongly based on the historical Right's discourse on the nation, and is applied rather rigidly to the controversial situations that are encountered in recent political life. The general tradition of the 19th century and later on into the 20th was based on the idea that there is a certain "unity of destiny in the universe" which keeps the people of the Spanish realm together as was proclaimed by Ortega and would be later on taken by José Antonio Primo de Rivera and through him Franco. (for more on that, see Juliá 2004)

Of course, there existed different ideas of what the term "Spanish nation" is about during the last two centuries and the two most prevalent ones: Liberal and Conservative versions seemed to be completely different from each other. The first one was based on the idea of the unique and unitary Spanish soul with the Jacobinist thrust in the political makeup and cultural emphasis on the Castilian language, values and so called "spirit," in general. And the Conservative tradition seeing Spanishness in Catholicism and unity of the Spanish peoples under the Crown, at the same time leaving the possibility of the cultural, legal, social and political pluralism. But even this possibility of administrative pluralism did not mean acceptance for the presence of the alternative national entities within the body of the Spanish state, again the Castilian spirit (just understood in a somewhat different way, connected with the rather militant Catholicism) is in the center of the understanding of the nation. (see, Álvarez Junco 1997)

Therefore, in a sense, the Popular Party could consider itself an heir of both of these traditions: it accepts the role of Catholicism in the makeup of the "Spanish spirit," but also relies strongly on the heritage of the 19th – beginning of 20th century liberal thinking on the Spanish nation. Furthermore, while the party's precursors did not view too favorably the Constitution of 1978 during the process of its creation, later on it adopted the understanding of the nation as presented in the Constitution as its own. The PP borrowed the term "Constitutional patriotism" from Habermas to describe its position and to announce that the "State of Autonomies" has already been completely consolidated and no further changes in the Spanish territorial arrangement are needed (Tusell 2004).

But having said that, how is the idea of the nation reflected in the constitution? Article 2 claims:

The Constitution is based on the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation, the common and indivisible homeland of all Spaniards, and recognizes and guarantees the right to autonomy of the nationalities and regions, which make it up and the solidarity among all of them.⁵

This controversial article, which seems to be rather ambiguous in its statement (affirming both the indissolubility of the Spanish nation and at the same time existence of nationalities within it) is supposedly giving way for three different interpretations: one equates nationalities with the regions; another sees them as so-called “cultural nations,” that is, regions with some specific characteristics. In this understanding a nationality is an “undervalued nation which does not yet have the conscience of being one and which lacks the possibility of becoming a State” and finally, the interpretation which sees nationalities as not much different from nations and which leads to interpretation of Spain as a “nation of nations.” (Álvarez Conde 2000, p.376-377).

However, it is clear that there is an inherent tension between the two parts of the article, proclaiming, on the one hand, unity and indivisibility of one nation and on the other hand, the existence of other national, ethnic entities within it. And the last interpretation, which reflects the best the multinational character of the state (*Estado plurinacional*) is the most difficult to sustain, because it is the Spanish nation, not the state which assumes here the quality of unity and indivisibility. It is on this nation, which clearly precedes its institutional form that the Constitution is based. The unity of the state is only maintained through the unity of the nation.⁶

This understanding, taken to its logical conclusion brings in important repercussions in the political field. And the PP does want to bring it to the logical conclusion, proclaiming that the multinational character of the country is a myth. The presence of affirmations of other nations within the Spanish state is seen as a problem to be solved not a reality to be faced. The rhetoric is centered on the threat to the nation which is seen as coming from all directions. In fact, the radicalization of the discourse of the party has gone to such lengths that it sees enemies of the nation everywhere, primarily, of course, the peripheral nationalists, but through them also the Socialists. The electoral campaigns of the last five-six years have seen the resuscitation of this idea of the coalition of red Spain and torn apart Spain (*España roja y España rota*), which was so prevalent

⁵ Translation taken from <http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/sp00000.html> The original: “La Constitución se fundamenta en la indisoluble unidad de la Nación española, patria común e indivisible de todos los españoles, y reconoce y garantiza el derecho a la autonomía de las nacionalidades y regiones que la integran y la solidaridad entre todas ellas.” The English translation misses the capital letter for the “Nation,” which is given a lot of importance in certain researches as an attempt to strengthen the meaning of this term in comparison with that of the nationalities (see, for example, Prieto de Pedro 1993, pp.175-176). Also, note the translation of the word “patria,” while it is true that it could be translated as the “homeland,” “patria” as a term has a different connotation than just that of the homeland.

⁶ For the most comprehensive analysis of the Article 2 of the Constitution and the subtleties of its adoption process, see Bastida 1998.

in the Civil War, representing the extreme danger to the nation and reviving the memories of the most bloody conflicts.

In the rhetoric of PP, everyone has now taken a depreciative tone on the idea of the nation, one, free and indivisible and from there come all the problems of the country – starting with the territorial problems, tensions between center and periphery and finishing with foreign policy (“because you cannot have a foreign policy if you are denying the existence of the nation” FAES 2005⁷). The party thus appears to be the sole guardian of the Spanish nation and hence the state as well, which is threatened with disintegration because all the other political parties are conspiring to destroy it. All these parties, in addition are dancing to the flute of ETA, the embodiment of all the problems of the country: ETA was behind the project of the Catalan Statute, as one of the leaders of the party proclaimed and then it would also be “paying political price to ETA” to recognize the existence of the Basque and Catalan nations, as another one told us on one occasion. (see, *El País* 25 Noviembre 2005)

This way, the discourse on the nation becomes deeply entangled with the discourse on violence. Presence of ETA is very helpful in that respect, because it sustains the idea that there is constant threat to the nation and in addition, allows to push out the demands of peripheral nationalists to the outside of political discourse. Violence being antithetical to democracy, the problems that are connected with violence can be left outside of politics. In that sense, according to PP, ETA violence is definitely related to the “territorial problems” (i.e. mostly the problems of the Spanish territorial arrangement, which is then seen as inadequate because it allows a strong presence of the peripheral nationalist parties in the certain autonomous regions, mainly Basque Country and Catalonia).

In saying that, the PP seems to agree with the Basque parties that also claim that the ETA problem is not just a problem of crime, but is a symptom of the unsolved territorial issues, a symptom of the imposed idea of the nation. However, here the similarity ends. As the Basque parties, as we shall see later, want to bring the issue of ETA into the political agenda, so for the PP it is not only this problem of violence should be pushed out of the political arena but that the “territorial problems” are indeed violent problems and should be treated as such. Not only can there be no discussion of these issues (changing Statutes, revising the Constitution to better accommodate the peripheral nations) but they should also be treated as criminal problems. The passing of the law that promises imprisonment for calling for the referendum explicitly directed at the Basque Lehendakari (prime minister) Juan José Ibarretxe when his notorious Plan was discussed is one of the good examples of such thinking.

⁷ The FAES (*Fundación para el análisis y los estudios sociales* – Foundation for the social studies and analysis) is a think tank presided over by the former PP prime minister José María Aznar and thus expressing views that are close to the ideology of the party.

Here we can also see clearly how the relations between the democratic parties can be distorted by the presence of violence in the political discourse. Thus, in the eyes of PP, both by accepting the need for reforms and by the propositions to negotiate with ETA if it lays arms, the PSOE government became guilty of treason and the PP stays in its stoic independence the defender of the true Spain. Which, of course, is nothing new in the Spanish history. The idea of saving the country and the nation can be seen in numerous intellectual and political figures of the country especially in the period before the Francoist dictatorship. The rhetoric of the threat of disintegration of the country is deeply embedded in the discourse of the traditional right. Here we can see a clear continuity of the narrative on the nation and its enemies, of the possibility of dismembered Spain. Presence of violence allows to keep such thinking alive and to use it for its political purposes.

This type of rhetoric was accentuated more and more throughout the last decade, always brought forward during any important electoral campaign. Even when the party was in power, the economy thriving and the social security increased, it still concentrated its rhetoric on the idea of protection of the nation. So much so that all the parties remained tied up in a conspiracy against the Spanish nation, a theory which got the most straightforward expression in the reaction of the party to its fall from power on 14th of March 2004. The conspiracy theory that manages to tie together the ETA, Al Qaeda, Moroccan secret services, PSOE, ERC and all the rest plotting the overthrow of the PP government because of the secret plan to destroy the unity and indivisibility of the Spanish nation is the last most lunatic expression of this idea.

Pragmatism of the Socialists

With the elections of 2004 after 8 years rule of the PP the Socialists came to power again. Already before assuming office, the party promised a lot of changes and many were already implemented. In its social policies, PSOE can be seen as a typical Left-libertarian party. The changes of school curriculum to exclude religion from the classrooms, allowing gay marriages, liberalizing abortion laws can be good examples of this. In implementing these reforms the party was not made hesitant by the fact that there was a strong resistance of the Conservatives and the Church or that it would significantly change the legal and probably even social outlook of the country. In so doing, PSOE claims, it only goes in line with the changes in the society itself, the society which claims to be Catholic but where Church attendance is negligible, a society where the tolerance to different lifestyles thrives. However, the same lack of hesitation does not apply for the other reforms that were initiated. I am talking about the Statutes, of course. And this cannot be otherwise, for the reform of Statutes involves the deliberation of the concept of the nation.

The PSOE does not question the existence of the one and indivisible Spanish nation. It tries to leave such questions aside, knowing that to deliberate on them would bring it to fight in the stronghold of the PP. But it inevitably had to do that because of the discussion of the Statutes. And in that discussion it appeared that

even the accentuation of the “nation of nations” idea of Spain, ends with the same reaffirmation of unity and indivisibility of the Spanish nation.

Even though the Catalans were promised that their Statute would be accepted without much change if it was passed by a great majority in their own parliament, this promise was broken and first, before the discussions about finances and the airports and other matters of the kind, it was broken on the Article 1 of the Statute which said “Catalonia is a nation.” Suddenly, the very supportive prime minister remembered that “for the majority of the Spanish Spain is the only nation”⁸.

Therefore, the defining statement which said “Catalonia is a nation” was wrapped in a nice formula stating that “The Catalan Parliament in its wide majority expressing the feelings and will of the Catalan citizens defined Catalonia as a nation. The Spanish Constitution in its Article 2 recognizes national reality of Catalonia as that of a nationality.”⁹ Thus, the same way that during the discussions of the Constitution the entry of “nationalities” into the text was successfully downplayed by the insistence on the primacy of the unitary and indivisible Spanish nation, so here the definition of Catalonia as a nation in such a statement only expresses a subjective point of view, not a legal reality.

This position, leaving the idea of the nation in the hands of the Right is a rather unfortunate one, for the Socialists did have a different view which was more accepting of the reality of existence of the different national-political entities at least at the time of the transition to democracy. It could be expected that the Socialists care less about such definitions, but that leaves them out of the creation of the new discourse on the nation and leaves the conceptualization of it in the hands of the PP which still keeps to the old notion of the Spanish nation as the only one existing in the Spanish state, as the one and the indivisible, still based on the Castilian spirit and Castilian language and values; and in constant need of protection and guardianship against the numerous conspiracies against it.

In general, therefore, the accusations that the PP launches towards the government in terms of its trying to destroy (and by destroy here it is basically meant redefine, which, for some, seems to be one and the same) the Spanish nation are just untrue, if not unfair, for the party stays very well in line with the traditional understanding of the Spanish nation. The only thing of which it probably can be accused is of not being enthusiastic enough about it.

⁸ “[P]ara muchos españoles la única nación es España.” (*El País*, 8 diciembre 2005) For the majority of the Spanish maybe the marriage between men and women was the only imaginable one, but that did not really impede the government to pass the law allowing also the same sex couples to marry.

⁹ “El Parlamento de Cataluña, recogiendo el sentimiento y la voluntad de la ciudadanía de Cataluña, ha definido, de forma ampliamente mayoritaria a Cataluña como nación. La Constitución Española, en su artículo segundo, reconoce la realidad nacional de Cataluña como nacionalidad” (*El País*, 3 marzo 2006)

However, while the fundamentals of the understanding of the nation are the same, the position of violence in the discourse is different. PSOE's worldview is more consistent with the general Western perception of the place of terrorism. The party does see it as a non-political issue that has to be separated from the other debates that take place in the country, more concretely debates on the Statutes and the territorial arrangement of the country. At the same time, this relegation of violence to the outside of the political field results in the same problems that were discussed above – it is not really possible to act and talk consistently while denying the political character of terrorism. In that sense both parties are coherent in their positions: the PP in that it presents the violence problem as related closely to the territorial problems and consequently wants all of these issues relegated to the outside of political field to be dealt with in legal instruments. And PSOE in that it sees violence as a completely a-political issue also to be left for the law enforcement.

PNV and the Basque conflict

Basque nationalists, as it was mentioned, present a clear alternative to this view. As their name itself indicates, they are mostly concentrated on the affirmation of another national entity – the Basque nation. There is no time here to get into discussion over the first appearances of the idea of the Basque nation or go deeper into the writings of Sabino Arana, neither it is time here to concentrate on the complex relationship between the radical Basque nationalism and its more moderate forms. So let us concentrate on the situation of current politics and see what is the relationship of this alternative national entity and the Spanish state and nation.

This is best exemplified by one project – the so-called *Plan Ibarretxe*, a project of reform of the Statute of Gernika promoted by the Basque *lehendakari*, accepted by the parliament of the Autonomy and rejected by the Spanish Cortes without considerable discussion with the reason that it goes against the Spanish Constitution. While there are arguments for and against such a statement, the supporting ones are probably stronger – the project is indeed based on the ideas that are contrary to the statements written in the Constitution. Where in the former we see the aforementioned affirmation of the indivisible Spanish nation, here we have a Basque nation which asserts itself, which demands its place in the Spanish state and goes even beyond that – to demand its right to choose its way of relating to it. It proposes a pact between the Basque autonomy and the Spanish state and the relationship between them to be based on the old Basque *fueros*. This view can go so far as to deny the existence of the Spanish nation as such. But it is less about denying something than about the assertion of something else. *Fueros* here do not represent only the historical heritage of the Basques, but in fact provide the essence to the nation itself, the basis for its distinctiveness. Therefore, the resurrection of these values, which were already somewhat captured in previous laws (a clause on historical rights in the amendment of the Constitution or the Statute of Gernika, *Conciertos Economicos*) meant one step more in the fortification of the Basque identity.

The reason why this new resurrection of old ideas happened exactly at a time when it did, can probably be found in the extreme confrontation between the PNV and the then ruling PP during its later mandate of 2000-2004. Both of the parties, thus, took the best of their historical discourses and tried to present them as an undeniable reality. The best for the PNV was *fueros*, a direct pact between the Crown and the Basques. This idea they tried to resuscitate already at the time of the making of the Constitution with little avail, but with the result that the referendum on Constitution in the Basque Country got very poor results creating legitimacy deficit for the newborn Spanish democracy in the region, a fact that is often brought forward when tensions arise. The constitution based on the one and indivisible Spanish nation does not seem to impress much the Basque nationalists, who think that their nation with its entire historical heritage is as worthy as that of the Spanish.

Related to this are also PNV's views on the violence of ETA. For PNV, ETA violence belongs to the realm of the political because it is an expression of the unsolved issues within the Spanish territorial arrangement. First, for the PNV, as well as other peripheral nationalist parties, there is no one Spanish nation, and the state's multinational character should be reflected both in the concrete legal documents, such as the Constitution, and in the treatment of the peripheries, which would then have a much greater say in the political life. Secondly, PNV definitely shares some important postulates with ETA and its environment. Especially the more independentist side of PNV clearly holds dear not only the affirmation of the Basque nation, but also the emphasis on the self-determination question. Violence, thus, becomes an expression of the lack of the possibility for the Basque nation to decide upon its future.

Of course, there are serious problems with the definition of the Basque nation, who should belong to it and how they should belong is always a matter of discussion, but when talking about the relation of violence to the political problems, the connection in PNV's discourse is made very explicitly – there is violence, because there is a lack of recognition for the Basque nation. Here, of course, PNV as well simplifies the picture significantly and chooses to ignore the aspects of ETA that do not suit this characterization. In that sense, PNV also follows the same line of thinking as the other parties. PNV suggests, like the others, that violence has no place in democratic politics, but does so in a different way than the Spanish parties – separating not only the violence problem from the problems of politics, but separating ETA itself into two parts – into its violent and political components.

This separation also sometimes results in some curious twists. For example, violence is to be relegated to the outside of the political discourse, but at the same time, the ones who commit the violent crimes in the name of politics should be given a preferential treatment over the “ordinary” criminals. When they engage in their violent activities, they are criminals, but when they are ready to be sentenced, they are political prisoners, the Basque prisoners. Therefore, Basque government, presided over by *Lehendakaris* from PNV during the whole

existence of the Basque autonomy, gives monetary support for the families going to visit their imprisoned relatives, advocates the university education programs for the imprisoned ETA members, etc. Violence should be punished, but the motives for it should be taken into account.

This issue leads to one other important consideration: whether there is a Basque conflict or not. For the PNV, it is clear that there is violence because there is a conflict that is the principal reason why the motives of the perpetrators have to be taken into account and that is also an indication that a political solution to the situation has to be sought. There is a conflict between the Basques and the Spanish because of the unsettled issues in terms of the territorial arrangements and the lack of national recognition, but also there is a conflict between the Basques themselves. In fact, ETA is as much a symptom of a conflict between the Basques as it is a manifestation of the conflict between the central authorities and those of the periphery. While it might well be true that the so-called national front written of in the treaty of Lizarra¹⁰ was created under the inspiration of ETA, it is also true that it was so warmly embraced by the other Basque parties (including PNV) because it promised a true solution of all the disagreements, a solution after which violence will not only lose all meaning, but will disappear from the scene entirely.

In contrast, for both of the Spanish parties, on the other hand, there is no conflict in the Basque Country. And this idea cannot be understood differently than assuming that ETA violence is not political at all. Violence is not political, therefore it cannot be an expression of anything else but itself, and subsequently there is no conflict. This idea fits neatly into the general discourse on the issue for both of the parties: the problem has to be solved by police and legal means, without involving the politics.

This idea can be taken to substantial lengths. When the organization is not political, but in fact has a wide network of supporters, where actually are the limits of the organization? How do we define where it begins and where it ends? These questions can sometimes arise in other countries as well – it is often difficult to define how much support has to be given to the organization for a person to be prosecuted by law as a “terrorist.”

One of the great achievements of PP while they were in control of the government from 1996 to 2004, was the outlawing of *Batasuna* – political party affiliated with ETA and the whole set of the so-called MVLN (*Movimiento Vasco de Liberación Nacional* – Basque Movement of National Liberation) organizations claiming that they make up a part of ETA. It is often argued that this legal measure was a very successful one – as a result, the violent activities of the Basque youth have

¹⁰ Treaty of Lizarra is a controversial document, under which all the major Basque political actors agreed to work together to build the Basque nation and to strive to achieve the Basque self-determination. ETA gave a blessing to this treaty by announcing an indefinite truce and claiming that it would leave the political issues to be decided in a democratic way. In a year, however, the truce was broken and the agreement between the Basque parties suffered as well.

diminished; the Batasuna was pushed into a tight corner with its leaders spending more time in the courts than in the more properly political arenas (even though one might argue that a court is as much of a political arena as the hall of the parliament); and ETA itself not being able to rely so much on the support of the numerous organizations from the MVLN. However, the decision is still very controversial: it goes well with the PP's definition of all the problems that ETA is related to as violent problems, but becoming a part of the state discourse, it does stretch considerably the understanding of what is violent and what is not. It actually outlaws a significant segment of the Basque society suggesting that it is not only the violent actions themselves but the ideological affinity itself between the actors and the protagonist of violence puts one outside of the democratic political society.

Conclusions

Violence can only have a serious presence in the political discourse of the country and the democratic political actors if it is related to other significant issues. Spain is notorious for not being able to solve the issues that other states have long since relegated to the background of the political discussions: what is the state, how it should be seen, what is the nation and what is that nation's relation to the state – are still the questions that shape political agenda. And these are the questions with which the issue of violence is associated.

In this short paper the positions of three parties and their relations to the political violence perpetrated by ETA were discussed. The first one, the PP presents itself as a protector of the idea of the Spanish nation, its unity and indivisibility and its eternal nature, an idea that goes back to the beginnings of the 20th century and which the party sometimes brings to enormous lengths, to a suggestion that everybody else is just trying to rip to pieces the precious Spanish nation. The party's rather rigid concept of what this Spanish nation is about, leads to the idea that any accommodation of the peripheral nationalists' claims to be equal partners in construction of the state are seen as the destruction of the State as such, a conception which resonates well if one relies on the idea that the indissolubly unified nation is what has created the state in the first place.

In this light its discourse on violence can be seen as well: the PP does see violence as an expression of the political ideas, but that just incites it to try to relegate it to the outside of the political discourse together with all those issues that are associated with it. Thus, the "territorial problems" become not just the issues of the democratic rearrangement of the state but violent problems and should be pushed outside of the political deliberation. Thus, as well, there is no conflict in the Basque Country, but all the organizations sharing the ideas that the violent protagonist advocates become criminal, violent ones.

The PSOE on the other hand, is more pragmatic in its approach and is willing, as the editorial of *El País*, one of the leading Spanish newspapers with a certain Socialist leaning put it, "to accept the reality" (*El País*, 13 junio 2005) of

Catalonia's, Basque Country's or Galicia's national identity without, however, a significant reconsideration of the idea of the Spanish nation. This position allows it to adopt a more pragmatic approach towards violence itself, but still without considering the political character of the issue. At the same time, the party leaves the definition of the nation and all the issues arising from that to its rivals of PP, trying not to engage itself too much into the discussions over the essence of the state or the nation. This unfortunate stance results in a situation where the discourse of the two main parties appears to be different more in form than in content.

Obviously, this cannot be said about the Basque nationalists. For them Basque nation is as much a reality as for the other two it is a fiction or an inconsequential fact. This understanding stems from the historical heritage of the Basque Country and influences the view on the Spanish state and nation that the PNV has. For the party, both the negotiations of the Constitution in the 1978 and the new *Plan Ibarretxe* were based on the same principles: that there has to be a pact between the entities that constitute the Spanish State: the Basques, Catalans, Galicians and the rest, and this pact has to be the basis of the Spanish state. This pact and not a certain Spanish Nation that has a quality of indissoluble unity has to be the founding stone of the state itself.

Violence in this type of discourse appears in a different light than in that of the other two parties. Violence, as we saw with the PP has to be considered a political issue, but with different repercussions: while for the former it meant relegating the challenges to the idea of nation, territorial arrangement and the nature of the state to the outside of the political discourse, in the case of the Basque nationalist, it means that violence is an expression of political ideas and has to be confronted in a political way.

These three understandings appear constantly in the political discourse of the country and leave their mark on a lot of major debates that take place there. The inability of the major political parties to impose their views or come to an agreement on these issues lead to tensions in the political field and remind clearly that politics is as much about definitions and interpretations, often based on significant past experiences, than it is about actual policy stances that political actors may or may not take.

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